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ABSTRACT

This research deals with the phenomenon of the successful middle-aged careerist who drops out of his occupation into an alternate life style. These people are considered a subset of the growing numbers who change occupations in midlife, despite continuing success in their chosen career. There is some exploration of the philosophical and practical meaning for society of such practice. The research uses data obtained through interviews with 40 people who had dropped out of their careers. The research attempts to provide a composite picture of the dropout: his motivations for dropping out; his pre-dropout situation and personality; his present concerns and status; and the process of dropping out. The author notes that for these people values appear to have become less extrinsically centered--for example, money has become less important than autonomy; status less important than self-expression. Contrary to the author's expectations, the dropout is neither an "impulsive" nor a relatively high-risk-taking individual. There are two ways of viewing the phenomenon--either as a threat to society or as a benign act; both approaches are examined. (NG)

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MIDDLE-AGED CAREER DROPOUTS: AN EXPLORATION

(Adapted from Dissertation Research
with the same title)

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In a society of noticeably shifting values about institutions such as marriage, religion and education, the institution of work appears to be in the forefront of the attitude change.

Reflective of that change is a phenomenon which is the subject of exploration in this study--the successful middle-aged careerist who drops out of his occupation into an alternate life style. No one seems to know the scope of this phenomenon, but there are a growing number in our society who no longer view work as the only means of societal identity.

This change in work attitudes is notable enough to receive a wide amount of attention in many circles. There are those who focus their attention on how it is manifested among the youth, citing the counter-culture revolution as a precipitating factor. Others see reasons intrinsic in work itself as causative in fanning the flames of occupational dissatisfaction among the employed of all ages. Both groups cite such concepts as alienation, lack of meaning, boredom, the need for self-actualization, and a sense of being exploited, as important reasons for a generalized unhappiness with work and its impact on the quality of life.

This change in attitude toward work seemingly has its effect on the whole concept of occupational careers and the success ethic as measured by one's career escalation (see Tarnowieski, 1973). People are more mobile within their careers, moving from one company to another within their particular field. Others are changing careers in a wide range of degrees, that is, from one field to another similar one (priest to social worker) or to a vastly different one (economist to opera singer). However, the degree of response by some, who have been successful in their careers, has been particularly dramatic. They have dropped out of the established career cycle seeking an alternate life style,

one unlike that expected of the middle class middle-aged person socialized by the "Protestant Ethic."

This response to the new ways of thinking about work attitudes has produced this group of career dropouts who are somewhat identifiable through career change group's sessions, magazine subscription lists, journalistic accounts in national newspapers and through word of mouth. Research through an exploratory field study method using the technique of open-ended interviews has produced this report of the arbitrarily labeled "career dropout", who has deviated from the societal norms.

Although attention has been given to the subject of career concern, it has mainly been focused on "career changing" at middle age. (Sheppard and Herrick, 1972; Levinson, 1969; Rapoport, 1970; Jacques, 1965; Hiestand, 1971; Stetson, 1971). A distinction was made in this study, however, between "career changers" and "career droppers".

Career success lost its meaning for some of those who had achieved it. Manifestations of that loss have occurred to the extent that many middle-aged persons dropped out of those careers to pursue alternate lifestyles. This study focused on those career dropouts.

Further, the attention that has been given to problems surrounding work in America has centered around concepts of frustration, disillusionment, alienation, lack of meaning, boredom, the sense of being exploited, and the need for self-actualization not found in occupational careers. Responses to work dissatifaction are said to range from suicide and alcoholism to career changing and/or dropping out. (See Task Force Report on Work in America, 1973).

The issues that are raised by this phenomenon focus around several questions. From the perspective of the society, how should this phenomenon be viewed? Should it be seen as a threat that valuable people are being lost? There is a loss to

employers of investment in training and experience to consider. Or, should these dropouts be addressed as benign in their impact, and simply considered as a recurrence of the "bohemian" syndrome? Perhaps, dropping out is only a transitional phase for those who will reenter the career cycle, and the issue is raised of what mechanisms can be developed societally to facilitate reentry. Then, the issue of the reallocation of work and leisure time through a lifetime as Kreps (1971) has suggested may be at issue here. Or the question of the dropping-out phenomenon may simply be related to the chronological development phase of the "mid-life" crisis.

In addition, there are practical questions raised about this group and how they manage to sustain a life style dissimilar to the one experienced during their successful career. What preparation did they make, if any? What impact did it have on their family life? their relatives? What fears and surprises did they experience? Was there a relation between their leisure skills and their present source of income? And was their residential life style notably changed into communal type living arrangements? These questions and the larger issues comprise the purpose behind this exploration: to give further insight, rather than give conclusive answers to the phenomenon of the middle-aged successful career dropout. This research has been focused almost entirely on what was said by a selected study group of career dropouts about themselves and their anormal action with the intention of establishing just what the issues are, as well as to raise questions for future study.

The answers to these issue questions were sought by the research procedure described here. Data were secured through open-ended personal interviews with forty people, who between the ages of 28 and 50 had dropped out of their careers. The field data were analyzed and organized into a framework developed from the same data. Patterns were established and utilization was made of the data to illustrate six areas of concern: the frustrations leading to the act of dropping out; the preconditions or precipitating events enabling the act; the access to alternatives to remaining in

the career; the committing of the act of dropping out; the sustaining of the dropout status; and the impact of supportive groups and organizations.

To bring this exploration of middle aged, middle class dropouts into a conceptual focus, the following concepts were dealt with: work is an important institution in American society; career changing is an emerging concern of researchers and policy makers; career dropping out is a notably unique phenomenon with some suspected associations with concepts such as alienation, anomie, and deviance and opportunity; and finally, deviance, as conceptualized by Becker in his sequential model of deviance, is a useful way to view the study group of dropouts in the presentation of the data.

Becker suggests that the process by which one becomes a deviant, such as a marihuana user, should account for how a person happens to be in a situation where it is available to him; and why he is willing to experiment with it in the first place; and further, why he continues to use it. Becker affirms that one does not become a user without going through the process of (1) having it available, (2) trying it, and (3) continuing to use it. He suggests that the explanation of each step is an integral part of the accounting for the resulting behavior. The three basic steops in Becker's theory of a sequential model of deviance are, (1) the committing of a nonconforming act, (2) the sustaining of the pattern of deviance, and (3) the movement into an organized deviant group.

In this research the study group was defined as "voluntary dropouts from successful careers and who were occupationally defined as 'middle-aged'. Brief definitions of the terms used in that description are presented to conceptually clarify what those terms mean.

Careers are defined here as that occupational pursuit which consumed a generally greater portion of the study groups' commitment, energy and time, is economically substantive; and is often that for which the person had been educated or trained.

The successful aspect of the career implies that the subject had reached a level or status coterminous with his age in his particular occupation. Upward mobility, position and salary range were used as indicators of that success; however, in addition, credit was given to the interviewee's perception of whether his status at the time of dropping out could be viewed as "successful."

Voluntary dropouts are those persons who were not fired, or released from their occupations at the behest of their employers. The voluntary aspect is important here because it represents a positive personal action rather than a systemic reaction. Although one could quibble over the word dropout, as, indeed, some of those interviewed did, preferring a more positive label to describe their actions, the intention in this research meant the removal of oneself from an already structured, societally condoned occupational career.

Another term which caused some consternation among the interviewees was the use of the term middle-aged. Several interviewees especially if they were under forty years of age, denied the accuracy of the term until it was pointed out that viewed in terms of what Sofer (1970:54) calls "age-status asynchronization" (that point where one should be in his career at a certain age), one could be occupationally defined as "middle-aged" as early as twenty-eight years of age. And further elaboration of the concept of middle-age was made by asking the interviewees if they lived to be ninety years of age and divided their lives into thirds, what the age range for the middle third would be. Whether the answer was convincing or not, this technique points out the arbitrariness with which one can label another middle-aged. In this case it refers to the occupational definition of middle-age.

A composite picture of any study group presents problems in that readers may tend to generalize from the picture. The composite presented here is the result of some quantifying worked out from the data. That leads to approximate figures

with words like "average," "most," "many," used descriptively. There is an applicable saying that "The average man is the one who thinks he isn't." There is no average dropout. Only an adding and dividing of certain characteristics as well as some specific accounting developed into the following picture gleaned from the findings more fully described in the dissertation. Background characteristics as well as those at the time of the interview are included in the following description.

Averaging an age of thirty-nine when they dropped out, and age forty-two when interviewed, the study group were mostly married with dependents. They grossed annual incomes ranging from $8,000 to $40,000 when they dropped. Approximately one-half had a Bachelor of Arts degree or its equivalent. The other half had earned at least a Master's degree and/or Doctorate degrees. Their fields of occupations included eleven in education, six in engineering, five in advertising, three business managers or administrators, two each in real estate, art, securities and social services, one each in research and chemical industry, one bank vice-president, and an international interpreter. Most dropped out between 1969 and 1973.

Following the act of dropping out, there was a short period of mobility. The group then settled down in rural and urban settings. Some remained in their original residences, living alone, or with their families. A few moved into collective living groups for economic and social support. Several built their own homes on property purchased from savings or liquidation of assets, utilizing gardening and other self-sustaining means for survival. Odd jobs, entrepreneurial enterprises, writing, and occasional consultantships provided small incomes. Others used invested savings prior to dropping out for income and some had spouses who worked in money-making jobs. Nearly all worked hard at either odd jobs or in developing their small farm-like living environments, or maintaining their urban

residences. At the time they were interviewed (1972-73), these incomes which were revealed by them ranged from $2,000 to $25,000 annually, several having increased their incomes after dropping out by utilizing creative abilities not used in their prior occupations.

With that composite in mind, what these findings mean is of concern next. There is an indication that "quality of life" values are no longer centered on the extrinsic factors of work, pay, status, etc. Instead, meaning, self-expression, autonomy and the like are of sufficient concern to workers that they are looking for changes, either within their occupation or out of it. Although this idea has been supported by the studies of blue collar and management level careerists cited earlier, the pciture is raised that a contagious effect of dropout models will seduce more white collar and professional careerists into the dropout mode of reaction to work in the established occupational system. Increasing inflation, job uncertainty, fear of the deleterious effects of a depressive economy in general, disillusionment with the "Great American Dream," lack of trust in the ethics of those controlling their lives in government, industry and academia, as well as a personal sense of "having been robbed in life," in spite of societally valued career achievements--all seem to contribute to this growing malaise.

The findings of this research describe only one small segment of those who have responded in a noticeably unorthodox way to that malaise, by dropping out. The apparent association between career changing and career dropping, however, makes investigation of the latter important as increasing public and private attention is given to career change at middle age.

Many frustrations with the work situations in which the careerists had succeeded dealt around the general theme of lack of fulfillment. Seeing themselves as not finding a valued meaning in their work appears to be the result of

their definition of what work ought to be, which differed from what it appeared to be to them. This theory of unfulfilled aspirations has been dealt with in other studies (see Stockford, 1969), but dramatic responses such as dropping out had not occurred.

These elements of dissatisfaction such as boredom, oppressiveness, plateauing, exploitation, lack of autonomy and meaning either are the result of unrealistic expectations in their careers, or a changing sense of values which some say occurs particularly at middle age (Neugarten, 1970; Levinson, 1972; Jacques, 1965).

To respond as they did to this career unhappiness would seem to point out that the group is composed of strong "risk" takers. The findings did not substantiate such an hypothesis. Rather, it seems that their definition of the value of working or not working made the trade-off to drop more appealing. Their descriptions of their work histories indicated that they were the people who stayed in their same careers and who carefully planned their exit by being somewhat secure before they dropped out, rather than being risky.

A working hypothesis that the act of dropping out was an impulsive reaction to being "fed up" with the work did not find much substantiation from this study group. Their investing, saving, buying property, continuing with working spouses, or having a foot in something else indicates a "security blanket" preparation by most of the group. Career changers described in other studies had similar economic security before leaving their old careers (see Clopton, 1973; Dunning and Biderman, 1973; and Hiestand, 1971).

Associated with this was the initial response when they actually dropped out. Nearly all needed some sort of new structure through which to unwind from a fully employed to a non-employed state. The planned trips, volunteer activities, sabbaticals, 4-day weeks, leave of absence testing, as well as the structuring of pro-

jects suggest a continuing need for the structure they supposedly rejected. However, the difference seemed to be the importance of their need to have control over the structuring of their lives--that is, it was necessary for them to self-impose the structure rather than have it institutionally "laid on" them.

Of all the preconditions and precipitating events which helped seduce the dropouts to take action, economic assets and lack of dependents and responsibilities seem to be of great importance. This is in keeping with Becker's (1963) notion that deviance is not necessarily the result of intrinsic personality differences, but of circumstances which are ripe for such action.

In addition, the findings indicate that the contagious effect of other people dropping out helped them in their decisions. The importance of having an identifiable reference group is indicated here. The need for the supportive encouragement of their unorthodox behavior by friends, groups, and literature was demonstrated in the references the interviewees wrote to them. The ideology of those whose values were similar further confirmed the action for some of the dropouts.

A combination of several described conditions leads to the interpretation that an escape from the impact of the urban crisis was an unstated but possible precondition to dropping out. The pull of already owning rural living property; the need for personal friendships; the desire to have greater control over their lives, and other such desires may well be descriptive reactions to what Hauser (1965) summarizes as the unhappy results of bigness in population, government and the economy which among other things separated a man's work from his residence. While, as Clark (1971:98) has pointed out, the problem may be an ideological one, the pull away from the urban area is real. He said,

> American cities are in a state of crisis today, beset by a host of financial, political and environmental problems. But the chief problem, in my view, is none of these. It is psychological...We are still torn between our romantic dream or rural utopia and the crying needs of urban life.

It could also be suggested that many of the dropouts who moved from urban to rural areas apparently were as influenced by that romantic dream as by the negativism of work. They would probably agree with Thomas Jefferson's assessment of cities when he said they were more "pestilential than yellow fever, to the morals, the health and the liberties of man." Certainly, the findings indicate that more liberty and better health was seen by the study group to be a plus in their move to the country.

Of those who did not leave their urban settings, and the one who moved from rural to urban, it could be supposed that a preference for an anonymity and privacy is valued by them as much as by Cox (1969:109-120) when he extolled the virtues of urban living, compared to small town living.

The need for collective living by some in both urban and rural settings seems to have been built on those psychological needs described by Kanter (1972:7) in her study of current communal experiments. She suggests,

> Although a number of today's communal experiments began with religious or politico-economic critiques of society, the majority are based on a third, psycho-social critique. This critique revolves around alienation and loneliness, both social isolation and inner fragmentation. It holds that modern society has put people out of touch with others and with their own fundamental nature. It rejects established society's emphasis on achievement and instead adopts as its credo 'self-actualization' or 'personal growth'. These utopian visions revolve around creating liberating situations that are conducive to intimacy and psychological health, enabling people to 'grow' or to 'do their own thing.' Society is seen as pushing people apart and forcing them into narrow roles that do not express their total selves nor allow them to explore their deepest and fullest human potential. In one way or another, modern institutions are considered 'sick'; they are felt to be instrumental in promoting the neurotic behavior at the root of our most pressing social problems.

From the illustrations cited in the findings, the collectives seem to be a saving source for those psycho-social negatives in their lives, providing them with a useful reference group as well. The importance of ideologically agreeing support groups, whether personal or via media does seem to point out the useful-

ness of the sociological concepts of role taking and the reference groups. Coser (1969:318-335) in a discussion of the conflicts of status transition, deviance and socialization says,

> If we view growing up as a continuous change in status and role, it entails some non-conformity either to the requirements of the status that has to be abandoned or to those of the status one aspires to but cannot claim. It follows that some measure of deviant behavior is endemic in the process of growing up.
>
> In learning new roles, a person faces sociological ambivalence twice compounded: he faces different expectations from various reference groups who all have an interest in his growth, yet who define his growth in different ways; at the same time, each reference group expects him to give up to role requirements surrounding his present as well as his future status.

This position of Coser's is similar to Becker's (1963) contention that deviance is sustained when a move is made into groups of like behavior. This is the final step in his sequential model of deviance used as the framework for this study.

The findings seem to indicate that self-renewal at middle age comes from challenges. Apparently, those challenges were no longer in the former career and the study group needed to structure new challenges for themselves. The surprise expressed by the interviewees that they were more resourceful than they expected and that they were increasingly excited about what they could do, seemed to have the regenerating effect that Gardner (1964) described in his book on self-renewal. He implored his readers to develop and sustain the capacity to be sensitive to change in order not to become psychologically inert or frozen. This appears to be the intention of the dropouts.

From such more of less informal social indicators one can raise questions concerning an overall interpretation of the dropout phenomenon.

Basically, there are two ways of viewing this phenomenon. One is to look at it as a threat to the society. The other perspective is that of seeing dropping out either as a benign act or one to be embraced as positive.

If one answers to the first question affirmatively, he begins to take into account what that threat is. For example, there is an economic loss to employers if the employee does not pay off with loyalty and longevity of employment. Skills learned through experience on the job are lost to companies, particularly if the employee is on an occupational level of white collar skill and above. The societal loss when professionals such as professors and department heads drop out, the cost to universities and the public supporting them is felt. In addition, if these skills are not being fed back to the society, a loss occurs. From the economic point of view, the dropout does not provide the income to be circulated in the society he did formerly, and in fact uses more public services and resources than previously, shifting the cost to those remaining in their careers.

These examples of the threat posed to society by the dropout phenomenon raise the question of how dropping out might be discouraged in order to minimize that threat? Some clues from the findings would indicate that there is a need to redesign the work situation so that the frustrations leading to dropping out could be eliminated--for example, by increasing the challenge on the job; by encouraging creative innovative thinking; by allowing more autonomy; by utilizing a more flexible allocation of work and leisure time pattern (the 4-day week, the sabbatical, etc.).

Again, if the dropouts already sustaining themselves outside of their careers are perceived as menacing to the work system, then some tactics for luring the dropouts back into the system would have to be developed. From the findings, it is difficult to see what those lures might be. Apparently, it is not money or job status. No doubt if some combination of the work expectations could be interlaced with the new pleasure-giving life style, such as part-time work, or at home work

or periodic technical consultantships, or training of new workers occasionally, then the dropouts might be attracted.

The alternative stance that one can take when viewing the dropout phenomenon is to see dropping out as a good thing. Recently, in the Boston Globe (1974:April 18) there appeared an editorial suggesting the value of dropping out:

> Work has its place. Putting one foot in front of the other will get you to the grave in the end. And method may be the opposite of madness. But it is through change that the unexpected likeness of unlike experiences is revealed. The creative connection is often made when one's back is turned. And it may well be through idleness and frivolity that the wholehearted person, who best can carry on with the world's work is reborn. If dropping out on the production line means dropping in on the human race, we're for it--and no strings attached.

Whether it is viewed as a good thing or just a benign phenomenon, there are social considerations that need to be made. What mechanisms could the public and/or private sector develop to encourage those who want to drop out to do so? Counseling groups such as those mentioned like the Vocations for Social Change? Would it not be useful to facilitate the dropping out process by gathering the information already supplied by the "old timers"in these groups and through the literature into a sort of handbook for dropping out? Information such as the timing, the economic planning, the possible job options, the way to live frugally and how to use community resources could be made available to employees via personnel officers, for example. More extensive and thoughtful use of the sabbatical or leave of absence could be explored during a trial period as a means to transitionally acquaint potential dropouts with the life style.

In addition to aiding the dropout to take the step, what sort of assistance could be given to sustain the dropout once he is out? Use of income maintenance schemes such as unemployment compensation could be extended in such a way to aid temporarily those whose financial assets are limited. No doubt some of those who

drop out would want the option to return to careers. What means for offering options could be developed? For example, is there a place in the higher education system which could absorb middle-aged men who may wish a new career? Or are there publicly supported facilities which can test the aptitudes of those seeking to see where they might be happier working? And what sort of debriefing counseling sessions could be developed to aid system returnees in reorganizing their ideologies, skills, and values in a way acceptable to them?

These questions which have been raised point to the need for more research into the phenomenon of successful middle-aged careerists dropping out into an alternate life style. Among the researchable possibilities are questions concerning the following issues:

1. Is there an age-specific relationship to career dropping? For example, is premature career dropping an early disengagement in which the middle-aged person gently phases out of an identity while he is still young enough to establish a new one?

2. To what extent are career dropouts persons en route to career change? That is, is the dropping out only a transitional step, a sort of self-prescribed 'sabbatical'? Is this pattern of deviance merely a pathway to a more normative one of career changing?

3. How important is the perception of minimal financial security as an element in the action of dropping out?

4. Is the dropout pattern a response to multi-dimensional forces rather than just a career malaise or rejection? For example, what effect does the convergence of middle age, the youth revolution, economic stagnation, disillusionment with the rewards of delayed gratification, and the emergence of alternative life style models have on the move to drop out? What is the relative import of these various forces--especially the push-pull aspects?

The social policy implications which arise from this study seem to indicate a consideration of the following issues:

1. What would likely be the impact of income maintenance policies as a further precipitating factor to encourage the disenchanted worker to drop out? Changes in one part of the system will have an effect on another part of the social system. Welfare policies as well as unemployment programs could make dropping out easier. And this would not necessarily be bad if one takes into account the costliness of worker dissatisfaction already confirmed (see, Task Force Report on Work in America, 1973).

2. The concept of serial careers must be explored as a solution to career plateauing. The societal expectation taught through the educational system that one prepares for a life-time career must be changed to prepare an attitude of occupational flexibility for those entering work. As a part of this change, means to aid those presently occupied to make career changes must be developed and tried in order to ease the transition for present workers.

3. Institutions such as higher education, early career counseling, career-change clinics should be funded as demonstrations to both explore and implement facilitating mechanisms to ease the occupational change constraints now existing. This would likely curtail the already demonstrated problems of work dissatisfaction which seems to result in poor mental health, alcoholism, suicide, etc. Continuing education programs already established in many academic settings is one possibility. Another type of education change mechanism not necessarily trapped in academic red tape needs to be developed to enable new learning to take place. Concepts like campus-free colleges could be developed and researched as possible funnels through which career changers or dropouts could go.

In general, a fresh new look at job redesign, work and leisure allocation, career development and those values surrounding the institution of work need to be taken if public or private policy is to be responsive to the apparent changes in work attitudes which precipitate the dropout phenomenon.

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